

What do you need to know about variable data printing?

Current landscape and influencing factors

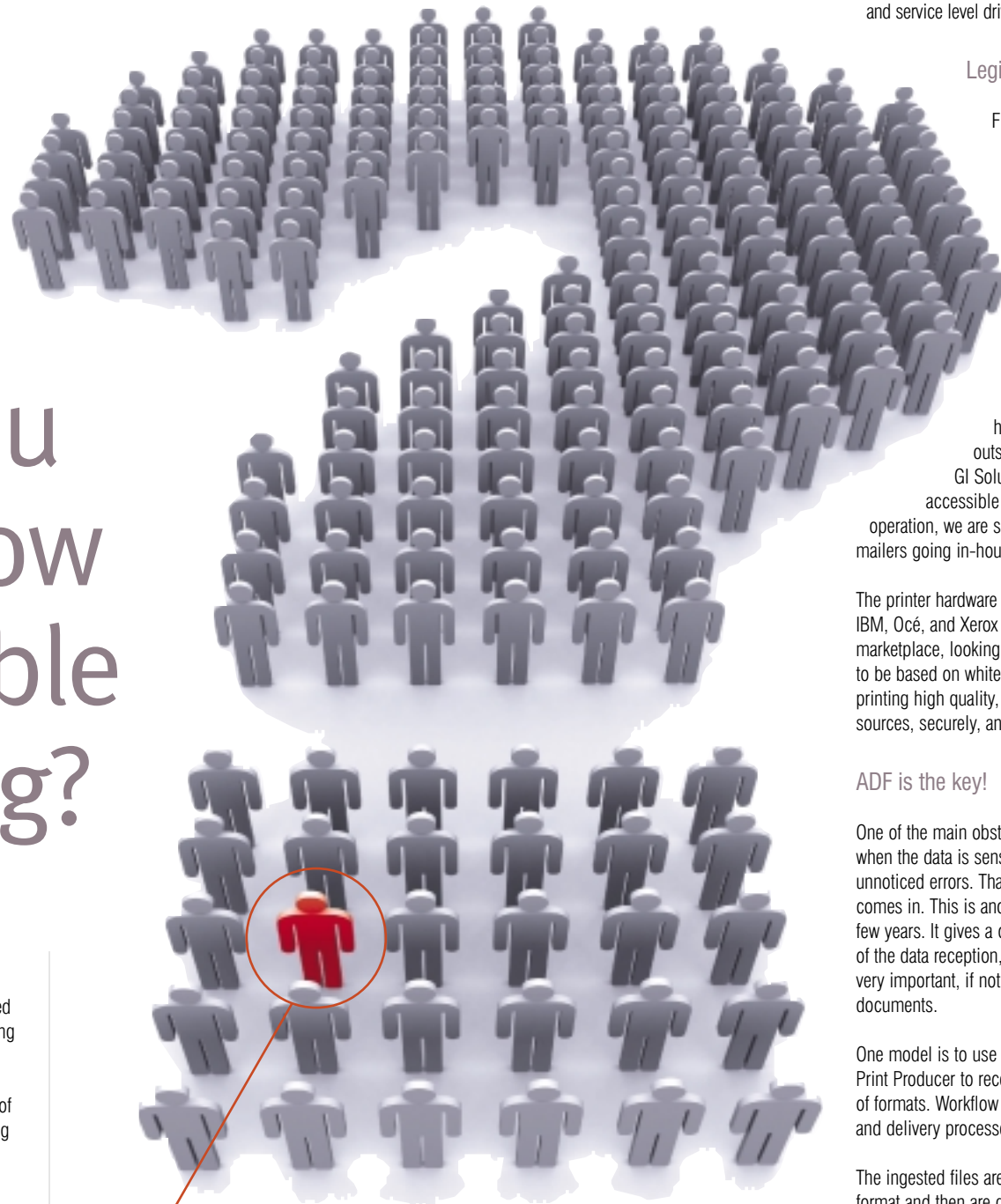
Variable data printing of any significant volume has generally been associated with transactional mailing applications and with personalised, direct marketing applications.

Several factors have had a radical influence on the creation and distribution of business critical transactional mail in particular. We have also seen a blurring of the line separating transactional and promotional documents.

Customer drivers

One influence has been the changes in buying behaviours. Today's consumer demands choice. It is common to shop around for pretty much everything these days, and it can all be personalised just for you. We do not buy holidays anymore. We buy flights and transfers from one company; book the hotels direct; purchase insurance from the credit card company; arrange roaming on our phones, excursions, and hire cars - with or without collision waiver. Everything we purchase is a la carte - the ability to customise the content of communications so they are relevant to the customer's choices - is becoming more and more important.

Businesses are being forced to treat their customers as individuals - the trade off, of course, is that the business enterprises are becoming more valued service providers. They are learning more about their customers and need to develop the ability to exploit that knowledge.



Exploit your customer knowledge and target individuals with relevant communications that will actually be of interest and benefit to them

Market drivers

As traditional business to consumer (BtoC) markets such as telecomms, banking, financial services, utilities etc., reach saturation levels, rapid growth can most readily be achieved through mergers and acquisitions. Integrating new document streams from new data sources brings with it a whole new set of challenges - and opportunities!

Economic drivers

The third influencing factor has been the increase in the number and variety of delivery options which are now available. The deregulation of the UK postal market and the increased demand for electronic online documents have provided financial and service level driven incentives for variable data printers to raise their game.

Legislative drivers

Finally, transactional and direct mail printers are faced with concerns around data protection, compliance issues, and avoiding integrity breaches which cost money, impact on customer confidence, and ultimately threaten customer retention.

Technology drivers

As digital print technology moves forward, especially in the area of colour, many high volume transactional mailers have seen the potential to add value to their bills. The main adopters of high volume, high complexity full colour technology have been outsourcing companies, such as DSTI, RR Donnelley, and GI Solutions - but as the technology becomes more accessible through lower costs, easier implementation, and operation, we are seeing some of the big financials and telecomms mailers going in-house.

The printer hardware vendors such as Kodak with Versamark and NexPress, IBM, Océ, and Xerox have all entered the continuous digital colour marketplace, looking for a slice of this highly lucrative pie. The strategy seems to be based on white paper in / full colour out with a single machine capable of printing high quality, completely variable documents from different data sources, securely, and at high speeds

ADF is the key!

One of the main obstacles to merging all of these datastreams, especially when the data is sensitive, has been how to control it and prevent disastrous, unnoticed errors. That is where Automated Document Factory (ADF) technology comes in. This is another area which has seen massive progress over the last few years. It gives a centrally monitored and controlled workflow which links all of the data reception, document production, integrity, and delivery elements - very important, if not essential, if you are printing high volumes of variable documents.

One model is to use an automated workflow product from Sefas called Open Print Producer to receive many print files from a variety of sources, in a variety of formats. Workflow will then manage and audit the optimization, production, and delivery processes from end to end.

The ingested files are converted at incredibly high speeds into an independent format and then are grouped, split, and sorted into optimized batches for production and delivery. This optimization process can consist of routines such as mail sortation, addition of barcodes, merging, splitting, adding colour, suppression, address cleaning, reformatting to two-up, simplex to duplex, etc.



For more information about variable data printing applications, visit www.sefas.com

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What are the benefits?

Implementation of ADF processes for variable data printers can expect many benefits as follows:

- **Reduced postal costs:** Merging documents into the same envelope; rather than send invoices and statements in separate envelopes, send them together
- **Optimised batching for Mailsort discounts:** Intelligently grouping non-qualifying batches of documents together, cleaning addresses, adding barcodes etc. to ensure the best value is extracted from your postal carrier
- **Royal Mail/Downstream Access:** Use the best value carrier for each batch
- **Electronic delivery:** Use email, fax, or SMS messaging rather than posting physical documents
- **Increased call centre efficiency:** Dynamically utilising white space on the document to introduce FAQ responses can minimise incoming call volumes
- **Controlling the workflow:** Ensure mailings are coordinated with call centre staffing levels
- **Increased productivity:** Group similar files together to form larger batches
- **Automated reprint capability**
- **No manual checking**
- **Enables the use of high speed production print and mail equipment**
- **Improved quality and integrity:** Eliminates errors
- **Improved customer relations**
- **Increased Revenue:** Improve marketing impact with "Transpromo;" using the transactional mail item as the Trojan horse to carry a targeted "onserted" marketing message to the bill payer has proven to be very effective
- **Utilise data:** Dynamically add the right message to the right document for the right recipient at the right time

What might the future hold?

The main stakeholders in a company's transactional print applications have traditionally been the Finance Department and IT - this is changing. As data becomes more manageable, the good old-fashioned 'bill' becomes an opportunity to communicate on a one-to-one level with the customer. Knowledge about where someone lives, how old they are, where they shop, what leisure activities interest them ... can be used to pass on targeted information about goods and services which are actually relevant and valuable. All of a sudden, the bill and other business critical documents have the ability to directly influence factors such as customer attrition and customer acquisition levels, where a swing of a fraction of a percent can equate to millions of pounds in lost or gained revenue.

Transactional documents are the paper equivalent of TV's prime time advertising slots. These are documents, which are read, looked at more than once, kept, filed, looked at again ... they are valuable to the recipient. If a relevant marketing message can be dynamically imposed onto this prime time document, it will be effective! The shift that is taking place will mean that the marketing heads of these BtoC organisations will be inevitably taking ownership of this very powerful medium of communication.

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